

Common Placement Standards: A Strategy for Student Success

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Aspirations for college are at an all-time high, but too many young people and older returning students do not have the academic skills for success in college. About six of 10 recent high school graduates across the nation take at least one remedial education course. But many students who need remedial courses find ways to avoid them or of those who do enroll, few complete their remedial courses and go to college-level courses that count toward a degree. This has devastating consequences for all students, but the impact is most dramatic on students of color and low-income students who have historically fared more poorly in reaching their higher education goals.

Perhaps what is most unsettling, however, is that these negative consequences might be avoided. There is evidence that students who enroll in and complete their developmental education sequence do as well as students who enter college-ready. No doubt a strong developmental education curriculum and effective teaching are critical to success. But states also need a policy infrastructure that systematically identifies students who need developmental education and ensures that they enroll. States also need a data and performance measurement system to monitor progress.

To move in that direction, *Achieving the Dream* states, in collaboration with Jobs for the Future, have identified a policy framework specifying high-leverage state policies that can promote student success in community colleges. Assessment and placement policies have emerged as high-yield activities to improve services to academically underprepared students. While each participating state has taken a unique approach to the placement policy options in the framework, they are increasingly moving toward standardizing assessment instruments and placement cut scores as a strategy to increase student success.

Connecticut is the most recent *Achieving the Dream* state to develop common placement standards across all community colleges. The Connecticut Community College System is implementing a legislative mandate from the state's general assembly in January 2007 to review placement policies and establish statewide common standards. By autumn 2008, all students entering community colleges — except those who have demonstrated college readiness on the SAT or ACT — will be assessed with the same college placement test and held to the same standard for entry into college-level courses. This is in sharp contrast to the previous policy environment where the standards and

Placement Policy Options	Yes	No
Are students required to take placement test?	Ark., Conn., Fla., Hawaii, Mass., N.C., Ohio, Okla., Va., Texas	Mich., N.M., Pa., Wash.
Does the state require specific tests?	Ark., Conn., Fla., Hawaii, Mass., N.C., Ohio, Va., Texas	Mich., N.M., Okla., Pa., Wash.
Does the state specify which students are exempt?	Ark., Conn., Fla., Hawaii, Mass., N.C., Ohio, Okla., Texas	Mich., N.M., N.C., Pa., Va., Wash.
Is there a common statewide placement cut score?	Ark., Conn., Fla., Hawaii, Mass., N.C., Ohio, Okla., Texas, Va.	Mich., N.M., Pa., Wash.
Are students required to enroll in or complete developmental education within a specified time period?	Ark., Fla., Okla.	Conn., Hawaii, Mass., Mich., N.C., N.M., Ohio, Pa., Texas, Va., Wash.

placement procedures varied from college to college, creating barriers for students trying to understand entrance requirements and trying to move within the system.

Connecticut's effort to close the gaps in the differences in placement standards comes at a time when growing numbers of the state's population — particularly low-income, racial and ethnic minorities and immigrant groups — are seeking admission to community colleges. Thus, instituting common placement standards will help the system to address the needs of incoming students from groups that have historically not been well served by higher education.

Additional research is needed to better understand the impact of common placement standards on student success, but the *Achieving the Dream* experience suggests that such standards enhance states' ability to send clear signals to entering students about what is required for success while enhancing the states' capacity to track outcomes and make adjustments that can increase student success.

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